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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

*Infestus Tutamen (aggressive protection)*

By

Shane M. Keena

August 9, 2006

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## **MFA Thesis proposal**

I am inspired by nature and make work inspired by natural forms and phenomena. When I view various structures in the natural world I see them as vessels, yet I come to the subject of nature as an artist rather than a biologist. This allows me to appropriate subject matter and use it as a vehicle of personal expression. I am inspired by the subtleties that occur in nature, such as fission, encrustation, and symbiotic relationships. Having spent a significant portion of my life scuba diving, I am particularly intrigued by sea sponges, and other underwater life-forms. Additionally I am attracted to using the vessel as a personal metaphor, by dealing with the characteristics of my personality which include issues of territoriality, occupation of space (both intimately and threateningly), and defense mechanisms. Formally my aim is to create a physical tension in the work along with incorporating elements of both beauty as well as the grotesque. I am also strongly interested in making ceramic vessels that blur the lines between vessel and sculpture. While I am interested in these natural forms, I am not looking to recreate what already exists in the world, but rather to use these concepts as vehicles of self-expression within the work.

## Introduction

ad·ap·ta·tion  
(ăd'ăp-tā'shən) *n.*

1.
  - a. The act or process of adapting.
  - b. The state of being adapted.
2.
  - a. Something, such as a device or mechanism, that is changed or changes so as to become suitable to a new or special application or situation.
3. ***Biology.* An alteration or adjustment in structure or habits, often hereditary, by which a species or individual improves its condition in relationship to its environment.**
4. Change in behavior of a person or group in response to new or modified surroundings.

I preface this thesis by stating that I have never been someone who adapts easily to foreign situations or new environments. I am a very guarded and distrusting person by nature, and jokingly refer to myself as the “resident curmudgeon”. My ability to adapt has always been one with a guarded nature, with my hackles raised and my suspicion regularly on red alert. Yet, when I decided to uproot my life and move across the country for graduate school, I had no idea just how much of an impact that would have not only on my personal life, but also how profound of an impact it would have on my art. With my wife and two Siberian Huskies in tow, we left behind the beautiful state of California, our friends, family, and all that was familiar for a new life three thousand miles away.

I was born and for the most part, raised in Southern California. The latter part of my childhood was frequently spent exploring the shallow tide pools of the Pacific Ocean along the Southern California coast. While other kids my age were playing with action figures, I could be found poking around these tidal regions, exploring the “natural systems” found at the beach. I can recollect that even at a young age, I was intrigued by how creatures occupied space. I was fascinated at how a sea urchin would lock its protruding spines deep into the recesses of the rock to avoid being removed from its rocky crevice, or how an anemone could quickly recoil and close up to avoid yet another biped poking at its stinging tentacles. I was utterly fascinated with this concept of animal defense reactions, and formally and conceptually, this interest would become a paramount and recurring theme in my body of work years later.

But I had to go back to a darker period in my early childhood to really understand where the genesis of my guarded nature began. When I was four years old my mother and father divorced. Unable to financially care for me as a single parent, my mother, with great angst, was forced to leave me with my father. What followed was four years of my father’s venomous anger, hatred, and resentment toward my mother, projected onto me in the form of both mental and physical abuse. Newly remarried, he uprooted us to relocate to Mississippi for a job. My father was a very skilled man who had an incredible and amazing talent for fine wood working, a craft and skill that inherently requires great attention and a perfectionist mentality. Unfortunately, his attention to detail trickled down into everyday life, and how he raised his son. It was routine for him to badger, criticize, and often beat me for things that were not done to his level of satisfaction. It’s interesting



from an outsider's perspective how the actions of a parent can shape the outlook of a child.

While it was only four years of my early childhood, I lived in a constant state of fear. In true Pavlovian fashion, I had become conditioned to flinch every time he raised a hand towards me, as I was never sure if I was about to receive a hug or a shot across the chops for doing something he deemed wrong. One of his routine forms of "discipline" was to make me go out and select a stick, also referred to as a switch to be beaten with. If the stick was not up to his standards, I would be struck for selecting an inferior whipping object, and then sent back out to retrieve the proper switch to be punished with. Most times I was simply an easy target to purge the day's frustrations of work. During the summer of 1981, he allowed me to visit my mother for a month in California. It was during that trip that the abuse I had endured for the past four years came to light. What proceeded was a brief legal struggle for custody of me on the part of my father and step-mother. I can vividly recollect sitting on a couch in the judge's chambers, my father to my left, and my mother and step-father to my right. The judge questioned my father about the allegations, which he adamantly denied, and in response he jokingly said that the only thing he had ever done to me was normal punishment "like this" as he proceeded to slap me across the back of my head. That signature gesture of affection pretty much sealed the deal, and my mother and stepfather were awarded custody of me that day. I remained in California for the rest of my childhood and early adult years.

Only now in retrospect can I see that the conditions I endured shaped the way I look at things and how I live my life. However, a highly respected professor at OTIS once said to

me; “*don’t be a victim or a child, construct your own reality.*” This is a philosophy I have come to embrace, both as a human being, and as an artist, and while I still carry some of those childhood scars with me, I have empowered myself to channel that hyper-critical, perfectionist trait of my personality into expecting the highest standards of my artwork.

## Choice of Materials and Working methodology

plu·per·fect  
(plū-pūr’fīkt) *adj.*

1. Of or being a verb tense used to express action completed before a specified or implied past time.
2. **More than perfect; supremely accomplished; ideal:** “*He has won a reputation as [a] pluperfect bureaucrat*” (New York Times).

I am a thorough person by nature, anal retentive and suffer from what can only be described as a hyper-perfectionist attitude fueled by a borderline obsessive-compulsive personality. I have come to terms that it is both my strength as well as my *Achilles heel*. However, over the years I have learned to embrace this neurosis, funneling that energy into my working methodology and my ability to handle and massage the material I work with. My art is ultimately a byproduct of the self, and has become a vehicle in which to express these characteristics and idiosyncrasies. I seek to use craft as a strategy only, not as a goal, and while meticulously fabricated, my work aims to exploit the element of craft

as a means to lure my audience in like bees to honey. It is only upon further investigation that the work begins to reveal the underlying subtext; a universal understanding of the concept of vulnerability, territoriality and the occupation of space.

*“Clay is the underground material of Postmodernism with its incredible plasticity and its form-shifting qualities that allow it to mimic other materials and genres. Clay is a chameleon substance; it has no fixed visible nature and it can occupy any spatial volume. Devoid of inherent form, it also requires next to nothing to stick to itself and has no need of glue, nails, or screws. It can be molded in a press like aluminum or poured into a form like bronze.”<sup>1</sup>*

With my work I seek to achieve an organic fusion between form, surface, and color, attained through my process of making, from wet clay to finished object. My process of creating is methodical and laborious, and my surfaces are achieved through the practice of adding, layering, and sometimes stripping elements of the vessels skin until the marriage of form and surface is achieved. My methods of fabrication are the intrinsic result of my obsessive personality. I am never satisfied with the concept of once a layer of glaze is applied, all is well. Most of my forms endure a minimum of five firings, and up to twelve in some cases before they attain the surface treatment that my lofty expectations demand. Often times my work will endure repeated firings, only to have part of its exterior stripped/matted/or pitted with the use of a sandblaster. While it initially seems counterproductive to eat away at the multi-fired surface, by controlling the level of pressure, it actually enhances the depth of the forms surface by subtly revealing its many layers of existing glazes. This layering and stripping of several coats of glaze is very

much akin to the method of surface treatment employed by clay icons Richard Hirsch and Ken Price, although Price's skins are layered automotive paint.

I subscribe to the practice of fifty percent empirical knowledge, and fifty percent multi-firing, with a dash of luck. Typically, my forms are not created with a predetermined color, texture, or surface in mind, but rather they serve as blank canvases that I marinate on until I am able to intuitively visualize the marriage of color to form. Much like Nagle's process of selection where humor, eroticism, car and food culture, and ceramic tradition are all part of the artists mix:

*"None of it is conscious, I know what I'm doing after the fact, but I prefer not to know what I'm doing before I do it. The choice of a piece's color is completely arbitrary, intuitive or whatever. I like the basic color and everything else follows."*<sup>2</sup>

Color has always been a critical element in my work, and my use of it stems from my interest in nature and natural objects. I have always been fascinated with the concept and palette of warning coloration displayed by toxic animals in nature. Some of the most deadly creatures in the world are no bigger than the size of a fist, often times much smaller, yet packing the most lethal of punches. I often look to the palette of poison dart frogs found in the Amazon, as well as that of the diminutive, yet noxious nudibranch, or sea-slug. The brilliant colors flaunted by these creatures have conditioned predators that they are non-palatable, and often times lethal. I regularly partner the semiotic use of these alarming colors along with physical defense structures to further establish the concept of the guarded self within the work.

*"The power of color, to me, is great, especially when it's on form" Ken Price*<sup>3</sup>

My working motto is “you fire as many times as it needs, until it either cracks or is done” and I’m currently marinating on having a line of t-shirts made up with this philosophy and marketing it to the other surface obsessed artists out there. The knowledge of materials and how they react with other elements is imperative, and through this process my forms achieve unconventional surfaces that avoid the over the counter commercial glaze look. What some purists would categorize as glaze faults, I embrace. Introductions of silicon carbide coupled with the heat of the kiln create lava-like eruptions in a glaze, leaving the forms skin with large boils and blisters. The introduction of Chromium Oxide or Potassium Dichromate in formulas creates a contamination effect, but when carefully controlled can create the most exquisite blushes of transition between glazes, and while many would consider this a glaze disaster, I strategically employ them as an intended result. These contrived accidents result in surfaces that are unique, intriguing and enigmatic. Adjectives used to describe my glazed exteriors have ranged from seductive and luscious, to radioactive and disturbingly vivid. Ken Price once spoke of the universal understanding of color and form:

*“Color conveys emotion, so it connects to viewers. Since color is an integral part of all of the objects in nature, it’s within the experience of almost everyone. By growing up with colored objects, people strong emotional reactions to color, and the colors of nature are the same as the colors of art. Historical artworks in museums may have lost, through changes in place and time, their original meanings, but the color still works because it’s based on nature. Language cannot describe or define the experience of color. You have to see it in order to get it. It’s the same when you’re working with color and form together, or when you change the surface a color is on. There’s no system that consistently produces good results. You have to go by feel and by eye. Color is strong enough to stand by itself. It’s like music.”<sup>4</sup>*

## **Form and Surface: The Price and Nagle Influence**

*“Being around the shoreline and around water gave me a kind of unique place to look at the world, the tiny creatures that bore holes in rocks are an example of how the beach environment has influenced my work.” Ken Price<sup>5</sup>*

From the beginning of my path in the ceramic arts, my work has been profoundly influenced and inspired by West Coast artists, and ceramic icons Kenneth Price and Ron Nagle. However, it is Price with whom I share the closest kinship. Price was a key figure during the Peter Voulkos led OTIS clay revolution in the 1960's in Los Angeles. While the aesthetic and energy of the time was heroic and bravado laden, Price opted to work at the other end of the spectrum, creating small, intimately scaled vessels. As a student in 1956, Price benefited from Voulkos's passion for experimentation and free-wheeling approach. However, Price yearned for a better understanding of glaze technology than what Voulkos offered, and after a brief stint in the Army, Price moved on for graduate work at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred, the oldest and most prestigious clay schools in the country. It was there that Price would begin to experiment and reject the use of traditional ceramic finishes on his sculptural forms through the use of acrylic and automotive paints. Price returned to Los Angeles in 1959, and what followed was the first of his mature series of ceramic objects: the “Eggs”.

*"Price is completely uninhibited by any tradition of technique, form, or style...He will juxtapose the most weird of primordial forms with the most brilliant of colors to create a strange interplay between the joyful and ominous"* <sup>6</sup>

These groundbreaking objects spat in the face of ceramic tradition and this bold new aesthetic helped usher the automobile culture into the artists' studio. This movement, which came to be known as *finish fetish*, involved a highly refined and sensitive treatment of materials in the production of perfected, yet idiosyncratic form. *Finish Fetish*, a phrase coined for the tight, crisp working style made popular by LA artists during the 1960's and 1970's. This movement was specific to Los Angeles, and although it paralleled Minimal Art in New York City, it was more optimistic and accessible in character. Influenced by the automobile and "Kandy Apple Kar Kulture" of Los Angeles in the 1960s, *Finish Fetish* objects incorporated the native tradition of craftsmanship associated with the modern surfboard, boat, aerospace and automobile industries. In fact, the *finish fetish* movement in ceramics has been determined to be the outcome of Voulkos's free spirited approach to craft juxtaposed with the hopped up visual effects of the hot-rod industry.

Although not an OTIS product, Nagle was heavily influenced by the energy and cutting edge work coming out of the Voulkos led OTIS group. It was after a slide presentation by Henry Takimoto during a summer course that Nagle became enamored with the energy of the OTIS crowd. Not surprisingly, Nagle was drawn to Price's aesthetic and the diminutive scale in which he was working, a major contrast to the machismo big ware produced by most of the Voulkos led OTIS gang. Regarding Price's work at the time,

Nagle stated; *"Here was this guy making boxes with cups and lace and it blew my mind!"*<sup>7</sup>

In Garth Clark's book *Shards*, Clark writes of Nagle;

*"The artist's color sense derives from many sources. He jokes that it was, in part a revolt against his teenage years when his father painted his bedroom gas chamber green, because he heard that the color was soothing to mental patients. The sickly green color aside, Nagle soaked up the palette of 1950's consumer products from junk food and cars to record covers and clothing. Nagle liked "peggers," the pants from the zoot suit, in powder blue, mocha, or pink and charcoal combinations. The California landscape was also a decisive factor with its pastel-colored stucco houses, turquoise swimming pools, tequila sunrises and ubiquitous sun-ripened oranges, although Nagle preferred the artificial, radioactive color of the corner-stand Orange Julius drink to the real thing."*<sup>8</sup>

A Bay area native, Nagle made regular pilgrimages to Los Angeles to visit his self-described Mecca, Irvin Blum's Ferus Gallery. Blum featured many artists of the *finish fetish* movement, including Kenneth Price, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Craig Kauffman, and Robert Irwin. Rather than emulating Voukos's style-*"macho was taken,"* Nagle states he took the path opened up by Price, whose intimately-scaled, blazing-colored pieces were closer to his own sensibilities.

*"Nature feeds Nagle's sense of color and form, as does everything from surfboards and Barnett Newman paintings to 16<sup>th</sup> century Japanese tea bowls and the play of green and orange on a Bell market shopping cart."*<sup>9</sup>

While Price rejected the use of traditional ceramic materials, Nagle was the antithesis of this. Although Nagle was profoundly influenced by Ken's ability to harmoniously blend



color and form with automotive lacquers, Nagle chose to hyper embrace the ceramic tradition.

*“In theory he could have achieved a similar appearance with less complexity and effort by using the very automotive lacquers that were his inspiration, as Ken Price did on his biomorphic “egg” sculptures of the 1960’s. But the latent traditionalist in Nagle surfaced, as it does unexpectedly from time to time. It was essential to his aesthetic “ownership” of the cup that it be completely ceramic and fired. Nagle sensed that paint, while perfect on Price’s work, would not give him what he needed.”*<sup>10</sup>

Like Price, and Nagle, my aesthetic was also deeply influenced by the Southern California beach culture lifestyle and the hyper palette of Los Angeles. I often joke that through the process of osmosis via my OTIS education, my aesthetic sensibilities were also born from the “*finish fetish*” aesthetic or “*LA look*”. Living in LA and being a part of the OTIS lineage provided me with the opportunity to regularly visit galleries that exhibited the works of these artists. I have also been extremely fortunate as well to have met and pick the brains of both Ken and Adrian Saxe. LA Louver gallery in Venice consistently features Price’s work, while Frank Lloyd’s gallery in Santa Monica regularly exhibits the works of Saxe and Nagle. These galleries were my Mecca, and provided me with the opportunity to frequently view the work and learn from the crème de la crème. I was, and to this day continue to be in awe of both artists ability to seamlessly marry color and form, while maintaining content loaded work. I took solace in learning that while their work exists on different formal levels both admittedly have looked to nature as a source of inspiration just as I have.

*“While surfing and hanging out on the California beaches in the ‘50s, a young Ken Price was mesmerized by the colors he saw in natural forms-the creatures living in rocks in tide pools, the coral reefs, the fish and even the ocean itself.”<sup>11</sup>*

Although all stylistically different, the meticulous “*finish fetish*” aesthetic of artists like Price, Nagle, and Adrian Saxe taught me the value of painstaking attention to detail and the necessity of making work that transcends beyond formal beauty, and while my art does not directly pull from the car culture of the 1960’s, it was indeed those picturesque California sunsets and cool school beach lifestyle that always captivated my aesthetic sensibility.

### **Other influences**

I have also found a kinship with two other artists, Earth sculptor Andy Goldsworthy and mixed media artist Lee Bontecou, more specifically with their investigations of “the void” found in many of their sculptures. I was introduced to the work of Andy Goldsworthy as a student at OTIS, and was immediately drawn to his aesthetic sensibility and laborious methods of natural fabrication. But it was his investigation of the void that I was instinctively drawn to, and like Price,



Andy’s exploration of the concept of interior space became a primary source of

inspiration for me. Goldsworthy's *Pebbles around a hole*, created in Kiinagashima-Cho, Japan in 1987 is one of my personal favorites, and epitomizes this investigation. This particular sculpture is made from found and stacked river pebbles, beginning with the darkest stones on the outer edge, and slowly and seamlessly blending towards the lightest colored pebbles until the eye reaches the enigmatic pitch black void. It's as if the viewer has stumbled onto a secret rabbit hole leading to the center of the earth. In his book, *Andy Goldsworthy: A collaboration with Nature*, he states;

*"The hole has become an important element for me. Looking into a deep hold unnerves me. My concept of stability is questioned and I am made aware of the potent energies within the earth. The black is that energy made visible."* <sup>12</sup>

Looking to investigate the darker, more macabre recesses of the inner void, I have recently been drawn to the porcelain and mixed media artwork of American artist Lee Bontecou, and her explorations of vacuous space in her enigmatic sculptures. Seeking to layer my work with elements of both of these artists, I have found that my ceramic sculpture embodies both the serene qualities of Goldsworthy while juxtaposed with the bravado and menace of Bontecou. Art Historian Dore Ashton was one of the few writers who, throughout the 1960's, stressed the ambivalent and encompassing range of meaning in Bontecou's imagery. In an essay published in 1963, she noted:

*"In this image-making prowess there is an originality that would be difficult to define in the logic of language, an originality in a quite literal sense: one is absorbed by the reigning image and knows instinctively that it had its origin deep in the artist's psyche...the reigning image is the black tunneled hole central to anything Bontecou*

*undertakes. This cavity bores deep and is, to my mind, far more significant than the obvious sexual connotations so often invoked for her work...in contemplating the black vacant centers with their tiers of protective shelves, the mind could just as easily go to wells, tunnels, sequestered and mysterious places that are not necessarily menacing. The circularity of Bontecou's central shapes can be seen as an inspired evocation of seep-seated human hunger of the axis mundi, the central point around which the cosmos circulates...not that Bontecou intends to relay cosmic insight...but the intensity of her expression and the currents of authenticity that one feels so strongly lead one to sense for a moment of depth and inexpressible sources of her imagery."* <sup>13</sup>



## **MFA Thesis Artist Statement for *Clay Dialects***

Having grown up near the ocean, I spent a considerable portion of my life exploring the shallow tide pools of the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Southern California. My memories of discovering the various life-forms found in the shallow tidal regions, along with being an active scuba diver over the past fifteen years have had a profound influence on my work. While various marine forms are my source of inspiration, I am not looking to recreate what already exists in the world, but rather to use these concepts as vehicles of self-expression that resonate within the work.

The objects in this show are the byproducts of self-reflection that echo the characteristics of my own personality. Heavily encrusted exteriors encase and protect the soft, visceral interiors of these vessels, serving as both a literal as well as metaphorical means for the concept of protection and vulnerability. By employing the inside/outside formula of the vessel as a vehicle for personal metaphor, these objects are the result of an exploration of the self and the investigations of territoriality, defense mechanisms, and the occupation of space.

## Body of Work

*“My work changes dramatically in relation to where I’m living maybe because I’ve always looked to nature more than art history” Ken Price <sup>14</sup>*

My agenda is not to recreate what already exists in the world, but rather create objects that are *chimeras*; the end game of a blending of ideas begging the question; “is it animal, mineral, or vegetable?” My forms come to life within arms reach, where eyesight blurs into touch. The work is enigmatic and at the same time archetypal, looking like something, but you can’t quite figure out what. At first glance, what seems to be some newly discovered botanical or marine form is, upon further investigation a more direct reference to the visceral, delving deeper into the concept of protection and vulnerability. I qualify myself as part armchair biologist, and part mad scientist. I scour biology textbooks for formal inspiration, and I am a self confessed Discovery channel addict. The major component of my artwork deals with basic defense mechanisms in nature, which I metaphorically employ into my forms to suggest a universal understanding of how one defines their own space and reacts to external stimuli. Viewers of my work may relate to the body posture of the pieces-some armored with layers of spines, some with alarming warning colors designed to repel, all swollen with bravado in a “*fight or flight state*”. This ubiquitous message alludes to how we define our own personal space, some receptive and some, as in my case, with their bristled hackles raised.

*“Everything I make has an inside because that’s the dimension I really like. I’ve been working with the void for years.” Ken Price <sup>15</sup>*

The byproduct of the past two years of investigation were on display for the group MFA show, titled *Clay Dialects* at the Davison Art Gallery at Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester, New York. My agenda was to seamlessly weave together a cohesive body of work, with forms that resonated with the underlying theme of bravado, structural defense mechanisms, and territoriality, all which ultimately act as metaphoric vehicles for the self.

On exhibit were a total of nine ceramic forms, consisting of six wall sculptures and three larger vessels on pedestals. The six wall pieces, three on two separate walls exist on a more diminutive scale, while the pedestal forms were more prominent in size. The rationale behind the execution of these two scales was deliberate. The intent of the sculptural vessels that occupied the wall was to lure the viewer in with their fantastic yet enigmatic palette, and intriguing surface textures. However, their placement required the viewer to get uncomfortably close to inspect the finer details. In order to look into the orifice like openings, they needed to squat down in order to peer up into the rubbery smooth interiors. Haphazardly brush against the work and it's sure to break the skin, get too close and you're literally going to get a poke in the eye.

*The optical complexity of Price's work brings the viewing almost to a rock-climbers halt. One's eye has to pick its way across the rich and difficult terrain, constantly measuring, weighing, comparing, trying to make sense of what the flat cross sections reveal about the rumpled whole."*<sup>16</sup>

### ***Durian Trio***

Displayed on the far wall were the pod form sculptures, loosely inspired by the exotic Thai fruit, the Durian. Swollen with the bluster of an animal defending its territory, these



forms were all physically armed with hackles of dagger sharp, protruding spines that aim to repel the audience upon closer investigation.

With its fleshy interior, the Durian is a strangely odd fruit that is best characterized as if



an armored pachyderm was genetically engineered with the DNA of an extinct Stegosaurus and this was their bastard love child. When initially digesting the concept of these forms, I was drawn to Lucy Lippard's description of Price's *Invasion of the Body*

*Snatchers* aesthetic as:

*"An ambivalent sense of vulnerable hostility, and away from the academy, they were simply considered compellingly repulsive-as if the House and eggs of Faberge's had come down with a resistant strain of the clap."* <sup>17</sup>

All forms were constructed from slip-cast earthenware, utilizing the same combination of molds to create a trio. Ironically, what was once a mold created for earlier whimsical cup forms became the tubular and visceral interior used for the Durian forms. In a sense, I turned the outside of the vessel into the inside. Much like Prices earlier work, the conceptual taproot for my choice of scale for the wall forms was deliberate, and sized to dictate the relationship between the object and the audience, and how they are forced to interact with it. Working on a window of fantasy scale, these objects were hatched from Price's belief that "*small work forces the viewer to get uncomfortably close, where it's*



*harder for them to be critical, kind of like when you're lying to someone when you're looking them in the eye."* <sup>18</sup>

The first of the Durian forms, *Untitled*, displays a brilliant lustrous orange surface with a network of 22 karat gold, fine spider web veining running over its entire surface. Protruding from the swollen lumps of the vessels skin is a series of sharp spines, painful to the touch, and deliberately protecting the blood red, soft to the touch rubber-coated interior. The jeweled surface instinctively lures the viewer in, yet the physical defense mechanisms rudely deny the viewer of physical engagement.

The second form, sporting a surface that is best characterized as that most exquisite razor burn imaginable, *Ibo* (which is Japanese for warty) is the second of the Durian inspired forms of the trio. The slip-cast earthenware sculpture sports a soft, satin white orifice with the faintest blush of moss-green, subtly transitioning the psychedelic lichen outside with the inside. With its alarming color palette of radioactive orange fading to chartreuse, this warty skinned form is completed with numerous bile colored spines, further referencing the protection of the vulnerable oral cavity.

The last of these forms, *Untitled* rests on the wall, displaying an exterior that could be best compared to that of rotting fruit on a vine. Like *Ibo*, the velvety soft, satin white orifice is encased by a thickly armored exoskeleton. However, unlike the alluring colors of the aforementioned two, this object's surface is pock riddled, and exhibits a sickly muted color combination of snot brown and smoker's lung black. The addition of silicon carbide to the glaze formula is what creates this disturbing and volatile surface

appearance. While not as flamboyant as its other kin, the diseased looking exterior also subtly integrates a series of painfully sharp, large barbed spines that are a reoccurring theme within the body of work. The resulting form appears be the creation of a mad scientist who has genetically fused a horned melon with a long-spine sea urchin.

With all of these three vessels, the fusion of color and form was calculated and inspired by a quote from Henry Hopkins writing about Ken Prices work in 1963:

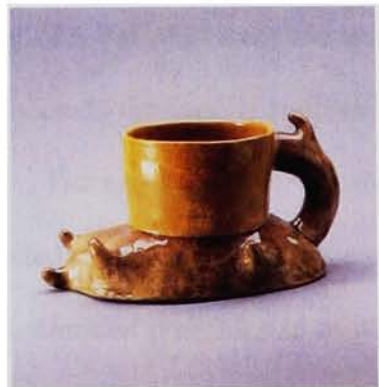
*“Like the geometric redness of the Black Widow’s belly or the burning rings of a Coral Snake, these objects proclaim their intent to survive.”* <sup>19</sup>

To the left of the Durian series, three additional wall forms were on display. One of these



dangling vessels was inspired by an image of the thorn riddled bark of a silk cotton tree I came across while scouring through a biology text book. Mounted with the intention of appearing like a rotting fruit dangling precariously from the wall, the form appears to be only seconds away from plummeting to earth.

Titled *Untitled*, this sculpture featured my desire to further investigate the inside/outside relationship of the vessel, and the theme of protection and vulnerability. Looking to create a surface that encapsulated the idea of the beautiful-grotesque, I looked to and was inspired by a cup made in 1968 by Price, titled *Wart cup*. Standing a diminutively whopping two and three quarter inches tall, Price’s *Wart cup* oozes with glistening knobby bumps, like boils ready to erupt puss and blood.



Yet, once one gets past the vomitous concept of such a surface, it is Price's methodical handling and massaging of the medium that seduces the viewer. Building on this idea, the surface of *Untitled* was attained by spraying chromium oxide over several layers of multi-fired glaze, resulting in an exterior that is a sickly, rippled and bumpy moss green color that conjures up images of the most disturbing venereal disease imaginable. If Gonorrhea had a color, this would be it. However, despite the disturbing premise of such a surface, there is still something oddly intriguing that invites the desire to touch. Growing out of the surface, the oversized, protruding thorns act as a physical deterrent, protecting the subtly ribbed orifice. To further accentuate the reference to the visceral, the interior was coated with a neon yellow rubber tool dip.

The middle form, also *Untitled*, is the most subtle investigation of all of the wall forms. With this particular form, my interest was in creating an uncomfortable physical and visual tension by the apparent defiance of gravity. As I am an avid scuba diver, I was inspired by the concept of a coral polyp floating along the ocean currents, until finally coming to rest on the substrate. It is there that this organism takes up a life time residence. In biology, the definition of this permanent rooting is referred to as *sessile*. With this idea in mind, I mounted the vessel with the use of a threaded steel rod that burrowed into a wood stud within the wall. Invisible to the viewer, the form is supported by epoxing a hexagonal nut inside the base of the sculpture. The entire diameter for the tail end is approximately the size of a dime, and when installed creates the appearance of floating in space. Extending sixteen inches out of the wall, *Untitled* protrudes from its sheet rock substrate like some enigmatic soft coral swaying in the ocean current. The

visual tension is further enhanced by the use of the ceramic medium, a material which is inherently about mass and weight. By ignoring the rules of gravity, the form evokes an unnerving sensation about it. The crusty skin of *Untitled* features platelets of white crawling glaze floating over a layer of satin turquoise, the result of adding magnesium carbonate to the glaze formula. Like the Earth's crust, the glaze surface wraps around the curves and contours of the entire form, eventually coming to an end as the eye is drawn into the fleshy red mouth. It's as if the viewer has stumbled across this coralsque form in the midst of filter feeding on its microscopic prey.

The last of the wall forms, *Untitled*, also dangles precariously from the wall like its other kin. This particular piece was the first of the wall forms fabricated, and admittedly the least sophisticated of the six. Lacking the physical defense structures that the others flaunt, it still formally investigates the concept of inside/outside that is the central theme of the body of work on display. A glazed surface of mold green encases the entire earthenware form, which is riddled with oddly disturbing bumps and nubs. Again, Chromium Oxide was sprayed over the entire form and multi-fired several times. This repeated process resulted in massive surface contamination, with the reaction of heat and materials causing the unpleasant looking glaze surface. Like the other wall forms, a small ribbed mouth at the bottom of the form was glazed with a flesh wound red, continuing the theme of the visceral reference.

On the floor, three additional vessels occupy the floor space on pedestals. The first, titled *Sponge Form* is a large stoneware sculpture sports a rough, boiled, peeled, and blistered

skin that bears a haunting resemblance to that of the worst case of acne a teenager could imagine. Coil-built from heavily grogged clay, this large vessel looks like an oversized bagel that was too close to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, this oddly mutated ceramic vessel nestles itself into a fabricated concrete husk, reminiscent of the foot of an anemone tucked into a rocky tidal crevice. Its posture balloons with bravado, but then begins to slightly recoil as the eye shifts towards the middle of the form, cowering in on itself like the school yard bully who has finally met his match. Protected by the gnarled, blistered exterior, the eye is slowly drawn towards the small opening that accompanies all of my forms, allowing the viewer to peer into the internal core. Resembling a freshly exposed wound, the interior glistens with its lustrous blood-maroon colored surface.

The second ceramic sculpture, *Untitled Bowl* is large stoneware and porcelain slipped vessel that resembles a cross between some botanical oddity and a creature drudged up from the deep sea whose swim bladder has erupted after being raised to the surface to quickly. Looking to explore the idea of an interior within an interior, I was inspired by the ceramic vessels of Richard DeVore, who coil-builds ceramic forms' that investigate the ideas



of inside/outside and the skin of the vessel. With its floralesqe rim flared out like some deceptive carnivorous plant, it tempts the viewer to peer into the soft inner core, but instinctively makes them pause before inserting their head. Like some mutated biological specimen in *The Little Shop of Horrors*, it incites a precautionary hesitation for fear of it

swallowing their head! Rather than simply using the interior volume of the bowl form to address the inside/outside relationship of the vessel, the inside acts as yet another layer for physical defense or protection of the interior. While the forms exterior is a rough, callus husk, the inner layer is blanketed with a skin of quarter inch tall, shelf-lichen type nubs which further act as a physical barrier, protecting the slightly exposed bumpy lime-colored innards of the form.

The last of the pedestal forms, *Untitled*, is a mixed media sculpture fabricated from colored concrete and slip-cast earthenware. Again, this sculpture is a variation on the theme of vulnerability. While continuing to investigate the formal issue of inside versus outside, the reference to the self also resonates within the work. Encased by an exterior of coarse concrete, a fleshy pinkish- red interior vessel nestles itself inside its concrete host like a creature who has wedged itself into a crevice in order to avoid predation. My decision to integrate concrete was to magnify and emphasize the idea of an impenetrable husk in which no metaphoric predator could penetrate. With its impenetrable exterior, the earthenware core acts as a metaphor for the self, while the callused and protective outer wall serves as the metaphor for my bristly, guarded bravado. Working with concrete as a ceramist posed certain technical challenges, as coarse gravel and Portland cement lack the inherent the plasticity of clay, forcing me to work in a slightly different manner than what I as accustomed to. While I feel that the idea of this particular piece is as equally sound as the others in the show, based upon the experimental approach I took, it is probably, in my personal opinion the weakest technically of all the forms.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, whenever one examines a body of work retrospectively as I have done, it is easy to see what could have been improved upon formally and technically simply due to ones growth as an artist. Yet I am proud of the body of work I generated, and I continue to explore these ideas and themes in my current artwork. My experience at the School for American Crafts forced introspection, and the need to learn more about whom I was and why I feel compelled to make what I make.

In retrospect, I feel that my graduate experience, although riddled with difficulties and unexpected personality clashes, has been one of profound growth for me, both as a person and as an artist. I have intentionally allowed for a period of time to pass before writing this so as to be able to sincerely digest and marinate on what I have learned and endured through my experience. I believe that the passage of time has provided me with a new perspective on why I was compelled to generate the body of work that I did, and have continued to explore. They say that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and as cliché as that sounds, I believe that if ever this is applicable it is in relation to my experience. But it is these struggles that forced me to knuckle down, and focus on not only what I was creating, but to look introspectively and analyze why I was making the objects I did. In a sense, graduate school is a rite of passage much like a vision quest, and it is only through the process of enduring the intensity of this experience that one comes out the other side a more focused, and accomplished artist. I am grateful to have gone

through, and to a greater extent survived this experience, and am honored to have worked with a faculty and committee of such well respected and accomplished artists at the School for American Crafts. My most sincere gratitude goes out to Robin Cass, Richard Hirsch, and Leonard Urso for grooming me, and pushing me to become a more professional and sound artist, but most importantly, a better human being.

*“Where nature ends, art begins” Richard Hirsch*



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